



THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON VIOLENCE IN
THE COMMUNICATIONS INDUSTRY

RESEARCH REPORT

SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE:

Violence in the Literature of Our Time

Robert Fulford

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THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON VIOLENCE
IN THE COMMUNICATIONS INDUSTRY

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There seems to be little argument over the fact that violence plays a major part in the public storytelling -- movies, television, books, plays -- of this historic period. The following notes attempt to explore some of the sources of that preoccupation with violence, and some of the explanations given for it. But before discussing that, I want to describe the community to which that fictional violence is offered, the community that pays money for it, accepts it, and apparently enjoys it. And here I proceed without documentation or footnotes, intuition being my only guide. My experience, as writer, husband, father, citizen, teaches me that I live in a community -- I'm speaking here of North America and the democracies of Western Europe -- which is dominated by envy. Most of the people around me, no matter how successful they may be, no matter how much they may have exceeded the original goals of their adult life, are profoundly envious of one another. This envy is without question a part of the human condition but in my view it is heavily reinforced, and distorted out of all proportion, by the mass media and the messages they deliver to us. We -- the last few generations or so, but especially the generation that came to maturity in the television age -- have to contend with something none of our ancestors faced: we feel compelled to watch, every day of our lives, an unending spectacle of riches displayed before us on the screens in our living rooms and (to a lesser extent)

in our cinemas. The pictures on these screens describe to us a life that in many ways seems superior to the one we lead. That pictured life is glamorous, exciting, sexually fulfilling, lacking in drudgery or boredom. It is lived by persons who are more handsome than we are, and apparently more satisfied with their work and their private lives. Most of these persons -- whether they are in spy stories or situation comedies or sports programs -- seem to move effortlessly from one absorbing event to another. Naturally, they arouse our envy. At the same time, while these programs seem to stimulate our envy accidentally, the commercials which interrupt them do so on purpose. The commercials describe to us a life that is better than the one we live -- full of comradeship, love, glamour. This is the life we can have, the commercials imply, if only we purchase the products named. We know that is a lie, yet we are unable to restrain the feeling that somehow we have been cheated of something. The effect of television, I am trying to say, is to make us unhappy with what we have or may ever hope to have -- and I believe this is a more important effect of television than the violence it may or may not cause.

The result of this much envy can only be a permanent, barely suppressed (and not always suppressed) rage. We grow angry at what we lack; and, as the year of television-

watching constantly remind us of the inadequacy of our lives, we grow angrier still. But television and movies offer us an antidote. They sell us a cure for the disease they have helped produce: violence. They offer us a temporary release in the form of horrendously violent movies and programs that release -- for only a moment, of course - our worst angers. As I've said elsewhere, this is a solution, of sorts, in the sense that heroin is a solution to an unhappy family life.

But where does the violence that the media provide come from? It can be traced at least partly to serious literature -- the serious international fiction that is admiringly reviewed in the newspapers, studied in our universities, analyzed in the quarterly literary journals. This literature is not usually Canadian in origin -- the theme of mindless violence that appears so often in international literature turns up only occasionally in Canadian fiction, and in any case Canadian fiction matters only slightly to the media climate we live in. It is not Canadian literature that shapes the minds of the men and women (mostly in Los Angeles and New York) who in turn shape the mass media.

Those who do not ordinarily read serious fiction may be surprised at the violence it contains. It is a commonplace of media criticism to note that the popular arts increasingly emphasize violence and it is assumed that in this emphasis there is far more than a hint of commercial motive:

"violence sells". What is not noticed nearly so often is that the serious novel, one of the least commercial of art forms, has also shown -- over, say, the last 30 years -- an increasing preoccupation with violence. Here the motive is seldom, if ever, purely commercial because the art form itself is only marginally commercial. Most serious novels do not sell more than a few thousand copies when they first appear. Authors and publishers do not produce them for commercial motives because, more often than not, the writing and publishing of such books is a way of losing rather than making money. What they are trying to do, out of an unknowable mixture of pure and impure motives, is to tell the truth. The 1976 Nobel laureate, Saul Bellow -- in whose novels violence appears briefly but crucially, like a series of lightning flashes - has recently said:

When it is going well, a novel affords the highest kind of truth; a good writer can lay claim to a disinterestedness that is as great as that of a pure scientist.... In its complicated, possibly even mysterious, way, the novel is an instrument for delving into human truths.... As a novelist, it is a good part of my job to attempt to formulate, as dramatically and as precisely as I can, the pain and anguish that we all feel.¹

Pain and anguish, endured without the ultimate consolation of religion, have been at the core of the modern experience, and it has been the novelist's function (among many other functions) to bring our particular contemporary pain and particular contemporary anguish within the realm of literature. In doing this, the novelists cannot help us to eliminate the pain and anguish; but they can show us ways

to think about them and experience them emotionally.

The developments in government and technology peculiar to the twentieth century, working on us both consciously and unconsciously, have transformed the western world's view of mankind, and at the same time have radically altered the serious literature of the western world. Under the pressure of public events, the central movement of thought in our time -- thought in this case as reflected by recent fiction -- has been away from the liberal humanism of the pre-1914 period and toward a pessimistic view of mankind's possibilities and prospects, a view that increasingly expresses itself through the imagining and depiction of violent acts as central symbols of mankind's nature. The American poet Stanley Kunitz has tried to sum up what this has meant to writers:

We live in one of the most violent epochs of history, in which none of us can claim ignorance of the many faces of disorder. A man of this century has witnessed great seismic shifts of power; the rise and fall of dictators; the convulsions of nations; the slaughter of innocents; unprecedented scandals in high places, brutalities, terrors. "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold", Yeats wrote.²

The present essay attempts to indicate how our changing perceptions of violence are demonstrated in the work of a few distinguished novelists of recent decades. It tries to suggest ways in which these works -- selected from among hundreds of examples that might be used -- mirror modern history, both as that history has actually happened and as it has been (partially) assimilated into the collective mind of western humanity. It considers the

possibility that violence in all forms of art, while at times reflecting commercial pressures, is nevertheless also an unavoidable part of our most serious as well as our most frivolous culture. And it tries to indicate how the use of violence in "high culture" (in this case serious fiction) may influence the content of "mass culture", i.e., movies and television.

The ideas contained here are necessarily personal. They are not based on a measured sociological survey; they do not pretend to scientific precision. They emerge from a lifetime of reading and a quarter of a century spent in analyzing the results of that reading in terms of its sources and its results.

My argument begins where the imaginative life of our time really begins -- in the German death camps as the soldiers from North America and England discovered them in 1944 and 1945, and under the blinding atomic sun of Hiroshima in the summer of 1945.

These events were so traumatic, so powerful in their effect on the collective western soul, that to this day -- more than three decades later -- we have only begun to sense completely their meaning. Their importance is all the greater for the fact that we try to ignore them. At certain times, and in certain circumstances, we speak of them; but for the most part, we try to let them rest. Yet they sit deep in our subconscious, their effects spreading out in waves to influence, not only what we say, but how we think and feel about ourselves and others.

On the one hand, we learned that what had happened in Germany was far worse than we had feared or even dreamt -- some six million persons, little children as well as men and women, had been gassed or otherwise destroyed after being pitilessly degraded. This was the worst crime of all the centuries, and it had been accomplished in our time by persons not vastly different from us. We were all implicated because it was not done by a small group of men -- a whole continent had conspired with Hitler to kill the Jews, and it was the same continent from which our culture sprang. The Holocaust is a fact of history from which we still shield ourselves, which we still have not altogether understood.

On the other hand, we learned in roughly the same period of the existence of a military weapon so terrible it could destroy us all -- and it had already been used (some said unnecessarily) to destroy a city. Ever since, psychologists and psychiatrists have tried to consider the effects of those events on all of us. The psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton has spoken of the "psychic numbing" that Hiroshima and Nagasaki produced:

Concerning the atomic bomb, for instance, one could find evidence of psychic numbing in the scientists who created it and the way in which they looked upon what they were doing; in the behaviour of the political leaders who made the decision to drop it, or at least failed to decide not to drop it; and in the pilots and crewmen who carried it to, and released it over, its target. When I say this, I am not name-calling, but attempting to illustrate a general phenomenon. In any case, I would stress the widespread indeed universal (*italics added*) nuclear numbing affecting us today.³

Since 1945 we have lived simultaneously with the knowledge of how badly humans can act when given total power over others and the knowledge that total human extinction is possibly our immediate fate. These two central facts, each of them surrounded by endless documentation and argument, became the major shaping data of our historic period -- they are responsible, more than anything else, for the intellectual and moral climate in which we live. Through them our thoughts were driven to extremes -- what one American poet called "the age of enormity" had become "the age of extremity". The death camps gave us one idea of human extremity, the nuclear bombs gave us another. For all the years since then we have lived in the shadow of these two events. They effectively destroyed our optimism, and our central belief in the inevitable progress of mankind; they gave us a new conception of evil and its permanent place in the world. They brought us to a dark recognition of the fact that evil will not be banished, will not be redeemed. As Jean-Paul Sartre says:

We have been taught to take Evil seriously.
It is neither our fault nor our merit if we
lived in a time when torture was a daily fact
... Dachau and Auschwitz have all demonstrated
to us that Evil is not an appearance, that knowing
its causes does not dispel it, that it is not
opposed to Good as a confused idea is to a clear
one.... In spite of ourselves, we come to this
conclusion, which will seem shocking to lofty
souls: Evil cannot be redeemed.⁴

Many of our most serious books, and many of our most frivolous, reflect the data that Sartre stresses.

It could be argued, of course, that books, particularly serious books, matter only a little in forming popular consciousness -- that same popular consciousness which is part of the subject of this Royal Commission. The argument could be made that television and (to a lesser extent) movies, have pushed books out of the arena in which mass taste is created; and that therefore the tendencies demonstrated by writers like Norman Mailer or William Burroughs are only distantly relevant to this inquiry.

Against that there are two important points to be made: (1) Novels sell better now, in paperback, than they have ever sold before -- and most of the novels mentioned in this study have been distributed in the millions as mass market paperbacks. (2) Despite the obvious commercial predominance of television and movies, the North American culture in which we live is still based on the written word. "Literature", defined very broadly, is the bedrock on which mass culture rests.

The second of these points needs some explanation. Every television show or movie, before it becomes a series of images, must be a series of written words, produced by someone who calls himself or herself a writer. This writer, however distantly, is part of the literary world and is influenced by the course of literature.

In the most spectacularly successful cases, the relationship between "literature" and mass visual culture is close and direct: the words are published and distributed first as books. The most popular movies (The Godfather or

Jaws) come from books, and so in many cases do the most successful television shows (Roots or Rich Man, Poor Man).

Beyond that, books remain the most important single means for developing, promulgating and exchanging ideas among the educated elite who create the mass media. When an idea appears on television, it is more often than not an idea that has first been developed in book form.

In this process, "serious" literature has a way of making legitimate -- at least in the eyes of the creators -- certain ideas and images that might otherwise be considered outrageous. The academic critic John Fraser, after surveying various kinds of violence in literature, writes:

. . . it is a great merit of some of the violences that I have been talking about in these pages that they make it harder to ignore certain facts, such as the intensity with which some convictions are held, and the implacability with which some people act on their beliefs, and the fact that in some conflicts both parties cannot be winners and that beyond a certain point one has to choose between them if one wishes to retain one's intellectual self-respect.⁵

Fraser is saying, in other words, that violence is an essential part of the seriousness of the works he discusses; without that violence they have less purpose and would accomplish less of what they set out to do. But this same kind of academic argument is frequently moved over into mass culture -- as, for instance, in many arguments given by the film director Sam Peckinpah, whose movies (beginning with The Wild Bunch in 1969) have led the way

toward more and more explicit violence in the movies and, indirectly, on television. The argument set forth by Peckinpah and his admirers is that only if we see something that looks like real violence on the screen (blood spurting from men's heads, for instance) can we understand the nature of violence. The "mild" violence favoured by earlier film directors is thus seen as an evasion, a form of dishonesty. The thinking behind this owes a great deal to what we call high culture: it is one of the many illustrations of an academic/intellectual idea put to use in the commercial marketplace.

Violent images and ideas (like ideas of many other kinds) tend to move downward in our culture. What is used in a highbrow novel in one decade may be used in a lowbrow novel in the next. Scenes of homosexual rape, explicitly described, appear in the 1960s in novels like those of Hubert Selby Jr.; by 1975 homosexual rape in a prison has turned up in Arthur Hailey's The Moneychangers, a frankly commercial, popular novel; and a year or so after that it appears on network television in the television adaptation of the Hailey material.

Sometimes the movement from high culture to serious culture is even more direct. Violence in a novel may be given a context that provides its meaning, but that meaning may be lost when the material of the novel is used elsewhere. Anthony Burgess's A Clockwork Orange, when it first appeared, was praised as a remarkably original novel: its brilliant language and its solemn discussion of the morality

of behaviour therapy were judged important. It was, beyond question, a "serious" work. But when the same material was made into a film by Stanley Kubrick, the literary quality vanished and the moral point was mud-died; but the violent actions were retained and reinforced.

The interchange between highbrow and popular culture is, however, more complicated than a simple and inexorable downward motion. Ideas move in the opposite direction as well -- the effects of popular culture can often be traced in serious literature, particularly since the 1960s. The writings of William Burroughs, for instance, are deeply affected by private-eye melodramas and comic-book fantasies. Popular culture is part of the environment in which the writer forms his own character and taste. A novelist who in adolescence sees movies like Peckinpah's Straw Dogs may decide that Peckinpah-like violence is acceptable in his own work when he becomes a professional writer.

For all these reasons we can only begin to understand violence in mass culture if we understand how it works in serious literature. In this context the novels of Jerzy Kosinski provide a set of examples. Kosinski works from within the world of Evil which Sartre described, the world in which Evil cannot be redeemed but must be acknowledged and confronted. His characters -- victims of Nazi oppression and ordinary citizens of the world alike -- have abandoned morality. Like the rest of us, they live in a

world driven to extremes of immorality. But unlike most of us, they allow these extremes to pervade their personalities and find expression in their actions. In this they are typical figures of modern fiction. Others like them have appeared in earlier writing -- in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's fiction, for example -- but in the past they tended to be rare exceptions and were studied carefully on just those grounds. Now they have ceased to be exceptions. They are the kind of people the serious contemporary reader meets again and again in the books of our time. Their lives and their natures are violent because they live in a world in which -- religion having largely vanished from public life -- the only real force is violence.

Kosinski is a moralist who writes about immorality. His morality lies in his insistence that we face the truth about mankind. Most of us are dedicated to keeping the truth about our common humanity at a distance. When someone does something of which we vigorously disapprove, we call his or her actions "inhuman" -- even though they may be actions which have been performed often by persons who are clearly members of the human race. Kosinski's books insist that it is as "human" to destroy as to create. His characters, stripped of moral sense, express that side of humanity which gave us the death camps, the Soviet slave camps, the atomic bombings, and the many subsequent events to which we have now become all but inured.

Kosinski's most recent novel, Cockpit, concerns a kind of freelance secret agent, Tarden, who penetrates the lives

of others and produces well-planned chaos. He uses kidnapping, killing, beating, and rape for his own pleasure and the advancement of his never-quite-defined plans. If other characters in the novel displease him, he plans careful and deeply painful vengeance. Towards the end of the book he has an affair with a beautiful woman and helps arrange her marriage to a rich man. She becomes famous and powerful, and then refuses to continue seeing Tarden. He plans revenge carefully. He kidnaps her and takes her to his apartment. He confronts her: "Was she stupid enough to believe that I would let her forget her personal debt to me or that she could abort our relationship when it pleased her to do so?" He goes out and returns with three derelict middle-aged men, whom he pays to degrade her:

They throw her down on the carpet. All three of them swarmed all over her, licking and squeezing. I climbed on the desk and took pictures from above. The spotlights shone on her hair, on the embroidery of her dress, on the derelicts' gaunt bodies. The men's arms moved over her like skeletons' limbs peeling off her clothes until she was naked and spread-eagled on her back, her arms flailing at the three scrofulous heads that eagerly bent over her.

After she has been raped many times, and otherwise degraded, she leaves his apartment. But again she refuses to see him. Now he determines to destroy her. He blackmails her into seeing him once more. They are to go to an air show together. He has prepared an especially hideous death. He goes to see a test pilot who will be showing aircraft at the show. He explains that he wants to put a woman in front of the aircraft's radar system and then turn on the system. The pilot says:

I can't do that. If the radar functions while the plane is on the ground, there's a serious radiation hazard. Do you know what radar radiation would do to her?

I do.

"It would kill her."

The pilot says that would be a hell of a way to kill a person.

"If you refuse me", I said, "I'll have someone wrap a heavy towel around her head to muffle her screams, and club her repeatedly with an iron bar until her blood soaks through the towel, and her skull, jaw and spine are smashed. Is that more merciful?"

The pilot refuses, but Tarden continues his argument:

"You found reasons to machine-gun, bomb and napalm thousands of perfect strangers [in Vietnam]. All I want you to do is switch on the radar. Instead of a village, its screen will show a single, human-shaped target. After a moment too brief for proper identification of the object, you will simply switch the radar off. Your mission will be over and for it I'll pay you as much cash as you were paid for all your combat missions put together. How's that for a logic tree? Can you override that?"⁶

The pilot agrees, the radar is switched on, and we are left to assume that the woman dies horribly of cancer in the months that follow.

There is a kind of addled morality to the character Tarden. After all, the woman has "betrayed" him, and at one point we are told she may be plotting her husband's murder; therefore she is punished. But if this is morality, it is a kind of imaginative version of the law of the jungle, because it is a morality stripped of restraints. Tarden has reached the point of limitless violence and exploitation of humans -- just as, Kosinski would argue, the civilized

world long ago reached it. Tarden argues that the pilot, after all, killed thousands of anonymous humans without a twinge of regret; his acquiescence in the radiation death of the woman is by comparison a crime of modest dimensions.

It can be objected that Kosinski, in Cockpit as in other books (The Painted Bird, Steps, etcetera) reaches beyond the ordinary depiction of murder or rape and moves towards the pornography of violence. His descriptions are detailed (though written in a spare and graceful style); he stresses the violence. But Kosinski could argue in reply that it is the very intimacy of his work, the very closeness of the reader's relationship to both the murderer and his victim, that makes his fiction meaningful. To distance the writing would rob it of its artistic meaning: literary art is only art if it matters to the reader, and Kosinski's stylistic closeness is a way of making it matter. For the writer to step back and regard his material with a cool eye would be to let the reader off too easily.

Kosinski has, in fact, argued that rejecting the "truth" of his direct, mind-assaulting passages is a kind of evasion which may be harmful to the reader -- even in the most practical terms. If one flees from such knowledge, he suggests:

. . . you make yourself even more vulnerable. The tragedy, for instance, of East European Jewry was that when they were, well -- collected -- perhaps I should say, by the Germans and transported to the concentration camps, until the last second they did not believe that they would perish in the gas chamber. They heard of it, but they didn't believe it. They said, it's simply incredible. Why would a civilized

nation do something of that sort? The inability to see the trauma of daily life as such breeds future victims.

I remember a woman who told me that she couldn't read the book [The Painted Bird]; she reached this particular episode and couldn't go through it. When I said why, she said, the eyes are being gouged out. And I said well, there are worse things in our reality. Have you heard of the concentration camps? Certainly, this I understand very well, but gouging out someone's eyes, how can you explain something like this? And this is my point. The concentration camp as such is a symbol you can live with very well. We do But when you describe the eyes being gouged out, you don't make it easier for the reader, he cannot help feeling his own eyes disappearing somehow, becoming blind.⁷

Kosinski sees his work, in all its violence and squalor, as a metaphor for the human condition in this period -- for what has happened, for what is happening, for what is likely to continue happening. In this he stands with a whole generation of novelists whose anarchic violence is a response -- possibly feeble, but also based on truth -- to a world dominated by anarchic violence.

Most readers, and many critics, have noticed that this post-Holocaust literature is painful. Moreover, the better the writer, the harder it is to endure the writing. Lawrence L. Langer writes: "... perhaps never before in the history of literature have authors had to fight a reader reluctance based not on an inability to understand what they

are about -- this has been the initial fate of Ulysses, The Sound and the Fury, and Waiting for Godot, for example -- but on the alleged assumption of the reader that he understood it only too well, that there is little need to burden the human imagination with further morbid explorations of a horrible reality which anyone with a long memory or a diligent curiosity is already acquainted with."⁸

The human mind, instinctively working in its own defence, rejects what it cannot bear; and the truth about recent human history is quite literally, in psychic terms, unbearable. We can handle only a little of it; some of us can handle almost none.

This is a more simple-minded version of the implicit demand for silence that the critic George Steiner sets forth -- half-seriously, but at least that -- in Language of Silence. Surveying the literature of recent decades, he finds that the writers as well as the readers have turned away from the Holocaust and the events related to it. "It is as if the complication, pace, and political enormity of our age had bewildered and driven back the confident master-builder's imagination of classic literature and the nineteenth-century novel." He suggests that "We cannot pretend that Belsen is irrelevant to the responsible life of the imagination. What man has inflicted on man, in very recent times, has affected the writer's primary material -- the sum and potential of human behaviour -- and it presses on the brain with a new darkness." Language itself is degraded by the enormity of the age, he

suggests, and possibly the only honest response is silence: "The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason."⁹

Elie Wiesel is one of those who chose not to be silent; in his classic Night he provided a widely influential account of a boy's life in a concentration camp. Wiesel's early life was spent in comparative security, in an atmosphere of predictability. Then he was taken to Auschwitz and, as he tells us, was changed forever. "The student of the Talmud, the child that I was, had been consumed in the flames. There remained only a shape that looked like me. A dark flame had entered into my soul and devoured it." He survived, and took it upon himself to bear witness, and in the process produced a masterpiece of -- well, of violence, among other things. At one point he tells us how three prisoners, two men and a boy, were accused of sabotage by the camp guards. They were hanged before thousands of inmates. Then the prisoners were forced to march past the dangling bodies:

The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive

For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed.

Behind me, I heard a man asking:

"Where is God now?"

And I heard a voice within me answer him:

"Where is He? Here He is -- He is hanging here on this gallows. . . . "

That night the soup tasted of corpses.¹⁰

The American critic Robert Alter has commented:

The novels of Elie Wiesel strike me as a singularly impressive instance of how the creative imagination can surprise our expectations of what its limits should be. It is natural enough to wonder whether it is really possible to write about the Holocaust, to use the written word, which by its very nature is committed to order, as a means of representing and assessing absolute moral chaos. With this awesome difficulty in mind, the British critic, A. Alvarez, has suggested that any adequate writing on the Holocaust must be in some way anti realistic, fracturing reality into jumbled splinters, as in fact the Nazi horror fractured the moral world which people used to imagine The achievement, however, of Elie Wiesel's five published books reminds us of the danger in issuing prescriptions about things of the spirit. He has managed to realize the terrible past imaginatively, with growing artistic strength in a narrative form that is consecutive, coherent, and, at least on the surface, realistic.¹¹

But a great many other writers have asked the question: If this is reality -- if the Holocaust and napalm in Vietnam and forcible imprisonments in mental hospitals in Russia are reality -- then what is left for fiction?

We could argue, if we still believed in the nineteenth century master-builders or literature whom Steiner mentioned, that what is left for fiction is the systematic re-creation of an ordered world and a moral universe. For many, art has replaced religion. Why, then, cannot art provide some of the moral force of religion? But the implicit answer from some of the most distinguished writers

of this period is that a disordered world can't call forth an orderly fiction -- that the only honest reflection of real disorder is a fictional disorder. It may be given an aesthetic shape, but it can hardly call on a morality that the world has ceased to live by and can barely even remember. Perhaps that morality never really existed -- perhaps Alter is right when, following Alvarez, he calls it "the moral world which people used to imagine". In any case, real or imagined, it has disappeared in the rubble of the century, leaving behind some ghostly shadows of itself and a sense of irredeemable loss.

The American novelist Jerome Charyn -- who is, like all serious novelists, at heart still a moralist -- describes the present world and fiction's peculiar place in it:

Terror is now the norm In a murderous, mechanical society, love and death have become interchangeable [Literature is now necessarily] the language of hysteria What-ever place the black humourists ultimately hold in our literature, they have shown us the brittleness of the human heart and have warned us of the emptiness we will have to endure in a society that has devoted itself to hate rather than to love.¹²

Against that view, it can be argued that at many points in history, conditions like those Charyn mentions were part of life. Terror was the norm in the French Revolution. Society was murderous in the slave camps of the nineteenth century. The Industrial Revolution in Britain and elsewhere must have seemed inhumnaly mechanical. None of these periods gave rise to the kind of pervasively violent and sickening literature that is close to being the norm in the present period.

The difference is in scale and in perception:

(1) Scale: There was never anything before on the scale of the Nazi death camps; there was never anything so horrifying as atomic warfare; nothing so massive as the Soviet slave camps has ever been designed before.

(2) Perception: Today we are condemned to knowledge of horror. Perhaps only a few imaginative persons in England (aside from soldiers themselves) knew how terrible World War I was; but all of us, watching television, knew some of the worst details of Vietnam. And while Charles Dickens knew there were slave camps, he never saw a film of one. The writers of today live with the monstrousness of our times engraved on their imaginations by film and still photo. Which is why a black humorist may insist, as Charyn does, that terror is the norm. In his own life, in fact, it is quite likely not the norm; but in his knowledge of contemporary life, it most certainly is.

It is this knowledge of an endless horror stretching beneath the sometimes placid surface of the modern city that informs the work of writers as different as William Burroughs and Hubert Selby Jr. Burroughs writes a jumpy, nervous kind of surrealistic prose, moving anxiously and unpredictably from scene to scene, whereas Selby works in a close-to-orthodox narrative style. But they both present the same nightmare world in which illusions have been destroyed and all hope of authentic love has vanished.

Burrough's characters, their minds and bodies rotted by narcotics, live in dread of a police state that is omnipresent but never quite real. They seem always to be looking

over their shoulders for the spy or policeman waiting to kill them. When violence finally occurs in Burroughs, it has the pace of a slow-motion film. His most famous and most widely praised novel, The Naked Lunch, is an addict's nightmare of pursuit, violence, and escape. At one point the narrator is being arrested by two policemen, and fights back:

I squirted a thin jet of alcohol, whipping it across his eyes with a sideways shake of the syringe. He let out a bellow of pain. I could see him pawing at his eyes with the left hand like he was tearing off an invisible bandage as I dropped to the floor on one knee, reaching for my suitcase. I pushed the suitcase open, and my left hand closed over the gun butt -- I am right-handed but I shoot with my left hand. I felt the concussion of Hauser's shot before I heard it. His slug slammed into the wall behind me. Shooting from the floor, I snapped two quick shots into Hauser's belly where his vest had pulled up showing an inch of white shirt. He grunted in a way I could feel and doubled forward. Stiff with panic, O'Brien's hand was tearing at the gun in his shoulder holster. I clamped on my other hand around my gun wrist to steady it for the long pull -- this gun has the hammer filed off round so you can only use it double action -- and shot him in the middle of his red forehead about two inches below the silver hairline. His hair had been grey the last time I saw him. That was about 15 years ago. My first arrest. His eyes went out. He fell off the chair onto his face. My hands were already reaching for what I needed, sweeping my notebooks into a briefcase with my works, junk, and a box of shells. I stuck the gun into my belt, and stepped out into the corridor¹³

The Naked Lunch -- which John Ciardi called "a masterpiece of its own genre . . . a monumentally moral descent into the hell of narcotics addiction"¹⁴ -- is vastly more than a documentary on the inner life of a junkie. Burroughs takes narcotics addiction, and the hallucinations that attend it, as a metaphor of contemporary

city life: its desperation, its meaninglessness, its intrinsic and endless violence. Anthony Burgess has called Burrough's work "a kind of mad science fiction, literature as a total release from the bondages of gravity and inhibition alike, sometimes baffling, often exhilarating".¹⁵

And that comment, particularly the last word, suggests some of the quality of the violence-charged fiction that is now so widespread: it is exhilarating precisely because it faces the truth of existence rather than hiding it behind euphemism and symbol. No matter how painful, truth carries with it a charge of intensity that can be richly satisfying, and this accounts for the fact that the writers discussed here, while they began in obscurity and were initially unpopular, have won sizeable audiences and great respect from their peers.

The fiction of Hubert Selby Jr. -- of which his first book, Last Exit to Brooklyn, is still the best known -- presents a world of brutalized and uncaring men and women who treat each other, within their own context, as badly as Nazi guards treated the concentration camp inmates. Selby's urban American slum dwellers live close to the edge of total violence. They rape and beat each other. Their sexuality is expressed in terms of outright violence and exploitation. One story, Tralala, presents a gang of teenagers who are using a prostitute and, in the wildness of their drunken emotions, move as if by casual accident from sex to violence:

. . . she lay there naked on the seat and their shadows hid her pimples and scabs and she drank flipping her tits with the other hand and somebody shoved the beer can against her mouth and they all laughed and Tralala cursed and spit out a piece of tooth and someone shoved it again and they laughed and yelled and the next one mounted her and her lips were split this time and the blood trickled to her chin and someone mopped her brow with a beer-soaked handkerchief and another can of beer was handed to her and she drank and yelled about her tits and another tooth was chipped and the split in her lips was widened and everyone laughed and she laughed and she drank more and more and soon she passed out and they slapped her a few times and she mumbled and turned her head¹⁶

First sex is a game, then violence is a game, and by the end of a long and powerful paragraph, Tralala is left for dead. The effect is that of raw, hard-edged poetry; the mood conveyed is moral desolation -- and yet, again, a bitter truth, buttressed by a firm and accurate style. Josephine Hendin has summed up Selby's work, and in the process said a great deal about this approach to writing:

This is Selby's vision of a culture's bedrock psyche, a portrait of an American mind gone the limit in its acceptance of cruelty as life's only fixed principle. Selby perceives pain, whether inflicted or felt, as the basic bond between people. If he does not gloat over the cruelty he describes, Selby nevertheless sees nothing else, nothing but the terror of those dismal, festering characters who spring from his imagination so fully formed in their vileness. He does write of them with love, with an energy and purity of style that is absolute in its insistence on your glimmer of recognition and assent: is their life yours? Whether it is or not, reading Selby is like being mugged.¹⁷

But it is also more than that. Selby, having created his characters in all their pathetic ugliness,

seems to reach out and forgive them. "Selby's genius is that he compels us to feel", Dotson Rader¹⁸ has suggested, and this, if not genius, is at least a large accomplishment. His work implies that we must accept the existence of endless violence in his characters, and yet feel for them despite our knowledge of what they are.

Because they are like us. Or, at least, they resemble the part of "us" that is atavistically violent and uncontrollable, that still connects with the pre-civilized impulses we have covered over with a sheen of social restraint. Norman Mailer is a novelist who asks us to go further than Selby -- he asks us not to look at his characters and sympathize; rather, he suggests that we identify with the violent impulses and actions of his protagonists. He does this most spectacularly in An American Dream. His central figure and narrator, Steve Rojack, murders his wife, exults in it, and spends the rest of the novel escaping the consequences. For Rojack, murder is a release -- from the psychic pressures of his successful life, from the cancerous poisons of resentment and self-hatred, from the threat of encroaching middle age, from his rage at women. In the murder scene, his wife tells him she doesn't love him, and immediately he feels lost: "I had opened a void -- I was now without a centre. Can you understand? I did not belong to myself any longer. Deborah had occupied my centre".¹⁹ She then taunts him by telling him of her lovers and the sex acts she has performed with them. He strikes her brutally, and she fights

back by trying to grasp his penis. He goes into a frenzy that begins in violent rage and ends in a kind of exultation:

I struck her a blow on the back of the neck, a dead cold chop which dropped her to a knee, and then hooked an arm about her head and put a pressure on her throat For a moment I did not know if I could hold her down For ten or 20 seconds she strained in balance, and then her strength began to pass, it passed over to me, and I felt my arm tightening about her neck. My eyes were closed. I had the mental image I was pushing with my shoulder against an enormous door which would give inch by inch to the effort.

One of her hands fluttered up to my shoulder and tapped it gently. Like a gladiator admitting defeat. I released the pressure on her throat, and the door I had been opening began to close. But I had had a view of what was on the other side of the door, and heaven was there, some quiver of jeweled cities shining in the glow of a tropic dust, and I thrust against the door once more and hardly felt her hand leave my shoulder, I was driving now with force against that door: spasms began to open in me, and my mind cried out then, "Hold back! You're going too far, hold back!" I could feel a series of orders whip like tracers of light from my head to arm, I was ready to obey, I was trying to stop, but pulse packed behind pulse in a pressure up to thunderhead: some black-billed lust, some desire to go ahead not unlike the instant one comes in a woman against her cry that she is without protection came bursting with rage out of me and my mind exploded in a fireworks of rockets, stars, and hurtling embers, the arm about her neck leaped against the whisper I could still feel murmuring in her throat, and crack I choked her harder, and crack I choked her again and crack I gave her payment -- never halt now -- and crack the door flew open and the wire tore in her throat, and I was through the door, hatred passing from me in wave after wave, illness as well, rot and pestilence, nausea . . . I was floating . . . I was weary with a most honourable fatigue and my flesh seemed new. I had not felt so nice since I was twelve. . . .²⁰

The scene is as morally repellent as any in recent literature; it is also as powerful as any that Mailer, in a remarkable career, has produced. It makes violence into a

perverse kind of poetry, and invites us to join the murderer in his joy. It thus represents a climax in the literature of violence, and in the acceptance of the ultimate immorality as a part of emotional life in which the reader is asked to share.

The violence Mailer depicts (however much it may reflect modern history) is a personal violence. But there is also in much recent fiction a strain of revolutionary violence, in which the author calls the readers to action in a struggle that will be profoundly violent. The French-Canadian Separatist novelist Hubert Aquin, for instance, has a character speak glowingly of a future filled with violence:

It will be time to strike, in the back if possible. The time will have come to kill and to organize destruction by the ancient doctrines of strife and the anonymous guns of the guerrilla! It will be time to replace parliamentary battles with real ones. After two centuries of agony, we will burst out in disordered violence, in an uninterrupted series of attacks and shocks, the black fulfillment of a project of total love. . . .

In this, Aquin reflects the often-expressed view of extreme New Left writers in the United States and in the Third World -- that freedom can be achieved only by violence, and that this violence is an expression of love.²¹

An audience of a certain size was ready for writers like Kosinski, Selby and Mailer before they produced their books. It was prepared for them not only by the great public acts of violence we have all lived through (in imagination, if not in fact) but also by the transformation of our collective view of our private selves that began

around the time of World War I. This transformation proceeded from the writings of Sigmund Freud and all those who followed, adapted, plagiarized, and interpreted his works. Freud, in his Oedipus and Elektra theories, suggested plainly that murder was within all of us; and this point of view, as it spread first through the medical profession and then through avant-garde literature and finally through the mass media, became one of the governing ideas of our culture -- as pervasive for us as the religious ideas of previous centuries. As W. H. Auden describes Freud's influence:

To us he no more a person
Now but a whole climate of opinion
Under whom we conduct our differing lives:²²

Freud saw the story of the king who killed his father and married his mother as the archetypal human drama, the expression of our most deeply buried wishes. He saw this first in himself, in his famous self-analysis. Then he saw it in humankind -- both men and women, in different forms -- and finally by the forces of his persuasive brilliance he imposed his view on western civilization. As he stated it:

I have found love of the mother and jealousy of the father in my own case too, and now believe it to be a general phenomenon of early childhood . . . the gripping power of Oedipus Rex, in spite of all the rational objections to the inexorable fate that the story pre-supposes, becomes intelligible . . . the Greek myth seizes on a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he has felt traces of it in himself. Every member of the audience was once a budding Oedipus in phantasy, and this dream-fulfillment played out in reality causes everyone to recoil in horror²³

Not any more: or at least, not so much anymore. Because by now we who have lived through both the Age of Freud and the Age of Auschwitz, accept as a part of literature that innate violence which is so clearly and so permanently a part of life.

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